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# Letting the Light In

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LETTING THE LIGHT IN

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts  
Visual Art

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By  
Owen Lowry Riley, Jr.  
December 2010

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Accepted by:  
Anderson Wrangle, Committee Chair  
Todd McDonald  
David Detrich

## ABSTRACT

**“Forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”      Leonard Cohen**

My thesis is a visual meditation on the transitions of life, death, love and emotion that come with age and responsibility. It is what I can touch and feel viewed through the frame of domesticity. It is a ballad of introspection, melancholy and hope redefining the beauty that has been masked by the fractures of time.

My thesis presents my self-created visions of the reality that surrounds me channeled through the 19<sup>th</sup>. century process of wet-plate collodion photography. The work is executed with a raw and haphazard disregard for the surface and with a worship of what lies beneath the facade. It is a method in which I defy perfection and embrace emotion. This artistic practice allows me to express what I feel in my work, rather than to document what I see in front of my camera. It celebrates the medium of photography as a means to get at the psychic emotions behind the living and the inanimate subjects that I photograph. It is an attempt to create contemporary icons that mark the stations of my life.

I make these photographs in rebellion against the boundaries of representation inflicted on photographic subjects via the software-generated perfection of the digital. These flawless images with their false and un-cracked surface of hyper-pixelated artificiality have become the standard that we hold ourselves up to as a culture. They have also created an art world of digitally created gloss that lacks even the hint of humanity. My work directly connects to art's history, not because I make a conscious decision to emulate an image from the past, but because I have immersed myself in art. This immersion gives the work a vocabulary of images, references and thoughts that come through my subconscious into the execution of the work. I employ a contemporary approach to picture making complicated by layers of historicity that I create when I impose antique memories on 21<sup>st</sup>. century images by using a historic process to make them. My work is not autobiography, but the subjects of my images are the people and objects that are familiar to me. The Vienna born art historian E.H. Gombrich once said "The familiar will always remain the starting-point for the rendering of the unfamiliar...without some starting point, some initial schema, we could never get hold of the flux of the experience."

## DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this thesis first and foremost to my wife Beth and my daughter Clara. Without their love, support and sacrifice I would never have made this dream a reality. I would also like to thank my parents, Owen and Grace Riley for their unconditional support from the moment some 30 years ago when I decided not to be a lawyer and chose to be an artist instead.

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A special thank you must go out to teachers, artists and friends Debbie Cooke of the Greenville Fine Arts Center and Blake Praytor of Greenville Tech, who inspired me, stood beside me and supported me in my quest for this amazing MFA adventure.

And lastly, a huge thanks to all of my students in Clemson Photo 213 and Photo 313 who studied with me the past two years. You have inspired me in profound ways with your hard work and creativity. It was a pleasure to teach you as you grew in your art. I hope in some small way I have inspired you to continue to live an artist's life in whatever you do.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### EMBRACE OF THE ARCHAIC

My embrace of the archaic medium of wet plate collodion photography, a process invented in 1851, is not to make imitations of a time past, but to explore a new way of seeing and laboring to create an image in reaction to the flawless nature of the digital world. By pushing the antique medium beyond what it is supposed to be capable of in terms of light and process I create images that honor the surreal and challenge any hope of perfection. This practice creates the flaws where mystery marries discipline and abstraction breaks down the perfectly drawn form of the photograph. The end result is at best a cinematic narrative, veiled in layers of history, cracked, broken and mysterious.

Though the technical process I use to make my images is a critical tool to realize my vision, the process is not the vision. Process is a conduit to my image making. I work in the directorial mode, constructing my own realities blending a combination of self-awareness and theater. My thesis can be broadly divided into the Portrait and the Still Life categories, but the images are not intended to function in the traditional expectation of these genres. In my portraits I am inspired by the people I chose to photograph, but I do not aspire to portray an accurate rendering of them. Though the subjects are willing actors in my play and physically do what I ask of them, they are not privy to the meaning behind the actions at the time the image is made. The connection I

have with the people I photograph in most cases has little to do with the real intent behind the images. At best that connection aids in breaking down the barriers of discomfort that they may feel when confronted by me, my large format camera and the awkward positions and stillness that is required by my technique.

The process of collodion is a complex one compared to modern expectations of making a photograph which involve pushing some kind of button or touching some kind of screen and there is a perfectly exposed photograph. That photo is ready to be transmitted, worked on in Photoshop or left on the picture-taking device to return to on a whim. My practice of photography is a much more complex and difficult series of chemical and physical moves that result in a single image. Working at full speed, at best I can make one image in ten minutes, not counting the many steps that follow the making of the image. The essential nature of the wet plate process is that all of the steps in making an image must be done while the film is wet. The film is made wet, exposed wet and developed wet. If it dries before development it is ruined. I begin the process by preparing my darkroom, either portable in the field or in my studio, with all the chemistry and water I will need to make the plate. The basic ingredients of an image are pieces of window glass that I cut to fit my view camera's film holders, polish by hand and then file the edges with a wet stone so they will not cut fingers as easily and so the chemicals I pour on them will not leak off of the edges. The film that goes on the glass plate is called collodion. It is basically a flammable mixture of a combination of grain alcohol, ether, gun cotton and other chemicals. It emits a powerful smell that can be overwhelming to

those with sensitive noses, but it is a smell that wet plate shooters like myself associate with making art, which for me means it smells of pleasure. Also in the darkroom is a container of a caustic mixture called Silver Nitrate, which binds with the collodion to create a light sensitive film. After the film is exposed it is developed in an iron-based developer and fixed for permanence in either cyanide, or sodium thiosulfate before being placed in water to wash.

The process of making the photo begins with the concept and subject, but the technical requirements of wet plate must be obeyed to make the image. The photographic plate must be made and exposed while wet and because of this there is a maximum window of about five minutes when the photo can be made. Because of this the image must be composed with the subject before the film is made, so the subject is left waiting. In the darkroom the sticky oil like collodion is poured onto the glass plate in a smooth and practiced motion. Then the coated glass is submersed in the silver nitrate for at least three minutes. After this the plate is light sensitive and is loaded into a light tight film holder that fits into my large format camera. I run to the camera with my rapidly drying film, check my focus, guess the exposure since it cannot be metered, load the film holder and take the photograph. If the subject is a person, they must hold still for the 30 seconds to five minutes that the film needs to be exposed correctly. Then I run back to my darkroom and develop the photograph. After 12 seconds of development time I can see instantly if the image, exposure and emulsion have worked. If the image survives the washing and drying process, which it often does not, I have a glass negative.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE RESULTS OF MY EFFORTS

When photographing people, the awkwardness of the process of collodion, coupled with the long exposures required, helps form a unique bond of collaboration between photographer and subject. There is an intensity of expression when a subject tries not to move for 30 seconds to five minutes. That expression can be seen countless times in photographs from the 19th. century. This intensity is mirrored in the photograph of my daughter titled “ADORATION” (Fig. 1.1). The photograph borrows from the early renaissance tradition of iconography typified by the works of Fra Angelico, who was born in 1395. Like many of his contemporaries he used a golden halo around the holy and blessed in his paintings. Her direct and confident gaze is set against a shimmering field of aluminum foil. In photography’s strange alchemy this simple material is transformed into a more precious substance, and helps to hold a tension in the image between the idea of the antique and the contemporary, between a very direct presence and an abstract meditation on spirituality and the temporality of life. The image is one of adoration, purity and the idealized worship that a father holds for his daughter. I have cast my daughter in the part of the holy, but recognized her humanity at the same time.

The demands of the wet plate led to both tiny and major photographic disasters that are part of my vision in this body of work. I manipulate the images with extended

exposures, over development and in some instances physically moving the emulsion on the glass during the processing. The gift of my meddling is a uniqueness that surpasses the normal. The images quietly scream of layers of history and of decay. The attempt is to unconditionally create an image that does not exist in life, though it is clearly based on life as in the photograph RESCUE (Fig. 1.2). The photograph presents a woman pulling herself up by her hair or being pulled down by her body while looking directly and calmly at something or someone outside the frame. The look is one of challenge, confrontation and fearlessness. Rather than being hung, her confidence speaks of her survival and strength. She will not be pulled down. A seam in the wall behind her hands suggests a wire that she grasps as she rises upward from the ripples of the emulsion mimicking waves of water at the bottom of the frame. My manipulation of the micro thin negative emulsion during the development of the glass plate negative warps the flatness of the field and creates the illusion.

I photograph for many reasons. I photograph to make a living as a photojournalist and a commercial photographer. I photograph to remember. I want to hold on to loved ones, to events and to memory itself. Like many photographers I took up the camera to preserve and to organize those things I feared I would lose. Theoretically the image of a person once captured cannot be taken away. I photograph to make art. The confusion of the picture taker vs. the artist is that the picture taker in some way believes that the subject and the photograph are one and the same. My photographs of my subjects are not my subjects. They are a launching point for meaning. My work as an artist diverges in a

clear division between the concept of holding memories and my highly structured conceptual and intellectual approach. That intentional practice is evident in the photograph BARRIER (Fig 1-3). The image functions on the simplest level as an idealized portrait of the sculptor Kara Renfro taken on the floor of her studio, yet to many familiar with Renfro, they do not recognize her as the subject of the image. Her focus and determination are clear as she gazes powerfully from a position behind a stainless steel form of her own design. The steel functions as a barrier to the viewer or as protection to the subject. Her direct gaze burns through the flame-like ghosts of photographic emulsion coming from below and above in the frame. Part of her face is veiled in translucent photographic artifacts called oystering. Like the girl in ADORATION, the contemporary subject functions both in the present and in the past. She is both of and in this moment, and at the same time she is Joan of Arc. Temporality is part of the power of this image and of the body of work as a whole.

The ambiguity in the photograph SISTERS (Fig 1-4) is the uncertainty of the feelings between teenaged siblings in an anonymous garden. It is intended to be an allegory on the relationship of sisters and the deep connection between them that cannot be revoked in spite of physical separation. The young women touch without touching, and share a deep gaze, which speaks to their understanding or misunderstanding of one another. They stand on one side of a wall that suggests an obstacle they will have to cross to their adult life. SISTERS is inspired in part by the photographer Duane Michal's "A Chance Meeting" when the two men in a series of photos have a connection

as they pass each other on the street, though they never speak or touch. Like Michal's work, there is no resolution in SISTERS, only an observation of a fraction of time.

When Frederick Scott Archer invented the wet plate collodion process in 1851, just 12 years after the invention of photography by Louis Daguerre in France and by William Henry Fox Talbot in England, it was landmark in photographic history. For the first time a photographic process married the remarkable quality and precision of the singular Daguerreotype with the reproducibility of Fox Talbot's Callotype process. The Callotype could be printed endlessly from the original image, but suffered from softness and a lack of fine detail. The Daguerreotype rendered an image beyond compare in its sharpness and detail, but it was one of a kind. The wet plate came close to the Daguerreotype in its ability to render detail, but could be reproduced endlessly. This sticky, quickly drying skin like substance was the primary photographic medium during the Civil War that used by Matthew Brady and his contemporaries to document the conflict.

The photograph ICHTHUS, (Fig 1.5) presents a seemingly wounded or defeated man with a reptile-like head who is pictured attempting to embrace the engraved image of a fish. Ichthus is the Greek word for fish and is considered a symbol for Christianity. The Bible in the Gospels also refers to the blessing of the loaves and fishes by Jesus that multiplied bread and the fish so that one serving fed 5000 people. To the artistically aware, the fish on the metal is recognized as being part of a printmaking plate, which can

be used to make almost endless multiple copies of an image. The fish glows out of the frame like a dark and vaguely religious vision.

Lyle Rexer commented in The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography that Daguerre's first image on a silver Daguerreotype plate of an empty Paris Street in 1839 was a picture of a scene never in fact witnessed. The street was filled with people and carriages, but the daguerreotype's long exposure time rendered moving forms invisible. The only person in the photo was a man having his shoes shined who stood very still for several minutes. My photographs require long exposures from 30 seconds to five minutes and they create an image that does not exist to the human eye. Colors are confused by the light sensitivity of the collodion film. Red can become black, the deepest blue is white, and a white flower is deep grey. Emulsion tears from the glass, flat areas read like waves of magnified flesh, holes appear on smooth skins and even the most rock steady living subject can blur over the time of the exposure. Like the Surrealists I find the work and the process of collodion commits me to an intense connection with the world of the unknown. I create my art, but my art is revealed to me. In the photograph GHOST DOG (Fig. 1.6), a spirit like girl and a bulldog blur like ghosts against a backdrop of massive trees in an image that speaks directly to the nineteenth century transcendentalist idea of landscape that dominated the period's view of nature through the writings of philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in *Nature* in 1836, of experiencing "a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear" as he walked through woods at twilight. Emerson wrote that the appearance of nature was dependent



on the mood of men experiencing a landscape. The same landscape that inspired joy on one day, he wrote, could turn darkly somber when confronted by the same person with a darker mood on a different day. So the massive trees pictured here are a thing of beauty or a thing of fear, depending on what the viewer brings to the photograph. The image also brings to mind the “curiouser and curiouser” world of “Alice in Wonderland.” It evokes the era and manner of Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson’s) own photography and that of Dodgson’s artistic circle, including Julia Margaret Cameron. The child and the dog are presented in an act of mysterious inconsequence and like youth, they disappear before our eyes.

The blur and soft focus in some of my thesis work reflects the philosophy of the 19<sup>th</sup>. century Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, who said, “Perfection of the image is not as important as the feeling of the image.” Like me, she also cast friends and family into fictional roles, yet still captured some essence of the person in the image. In the photograph BEAST (Fig 1.7) taken of my Bengal house cat I have captured some of the essence of the feline as I explore the incongruence between the reality of the house cat which purrs and rubs against its owner’s arms in domestic bliss, but on leaving the house becomes a beast of prey. The technical use of multiple long exposures and movement blurs the sweet domestic cat into a vision of the wildness he keeps hidden until he stalks and kills. The photograph is inspired by Henri Rousseau’s painting “Tiger in a Tropical Storm, 1891,” in which a wild tiger waits in a sea of grass. Any person who

spends time with pet animals knows that the domestic animal hides his wildness in a shadow play of peace.

There is an expectation of flaws and decay in a historic photo. Faded faces, scratched scenes, wrinkles and deterioration are part of the experience. When modern viewers confront contemporary image making using an antique process, the images bear the scars of age. In my work I wish for their experience to be a merging of the historic with the contemporary as in the photograph SEARCH (Fig. 1.8). The photograph employs the artist as the actor, looking at the audience with surprise through an upended building over a smooth road riddled with scars and pure white light. The white of his mustache and the lines on his face are clues to years of creating and tearing down. The face seems a little shocked, maybe gleefully wild, or fearful. When the image is viewed through the context of the subject as the photographer, it is not a stretch to imagine that he is looking at the viewer in the same way he would approach them through his camera. The frame of the camera is the shield that gives him permission to look intensely and without fear.

There is a long history of artists looking to the past to realize their visions of the future. In the 21<sup>st</sup>. century the artist Sally Mann uses the wet plate collodion process as I do, and Chuck Close and his collaborator Jerry Spagnoli using the contemporary Daguerreotype. Like me, Mann attempts to reveal through flaws and destruction a vision

that takes her work beyond the surface of photography. Close sought to see every detail and perfection via the super realism of the Daguerreotype, which cannot be matched by even the most advanced contemporary digital processes. Mann's work practice seeks to present a real view of a natural moment in her life, though we know that her process is directorial, constrained by the awkwardness of the process. Close looks to get an exacting rendering of the body and every skin pore in his studio portraits. I work in the directorial mode to achieve a moment of reality that is twisted into a dream like state of visualization. I am trying to see something beyond what I see before me. This is not a new practice in the short history of photography since working in the directorial mode with constructed reality has been with us since the beginning of the medium in 1839. In 1858 Henry Peach Robinson created his "Fading Away" photograph showing a fictional death bed scene by employing actors, constructed sets and multiple images printed together to create a fictional image that read as truth. It is not a great leap to go forward 142 years to Jeff Wall's late 20<sup>th</sup>. Century masterpiece, "*After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue* 1999–2000 Here Wall has employed an actor, constructed set and multiple images printed together to present a work of fiction as a true moment. Wall's image making is seen as a great leap into post-modernism, but is actually a leap backward to the 19<sup>th</sup>. Century. He escapes from the 19<sup>th</sup>. century mode and spans new ground in his embrace of the large scale, light box lit transparencies which compete with huge paintings on museum walls. In 1858 a photograph was limited to the size of the glass plate on which the image was captured. Not being a Luddite, and making my images in the contemporary art context, I had to address the issue of scale. I scan the 4x5 inch

glass negatives into a digital image and then output the prints on archival inkjet paper to whatever size I choose. The largest prints in my thesis are 32x40 inches.

I owe a great debt to the artists I have mentioned and to other 21<sup>st</sup>. century artists such as Philip Lorca diCorcia and Gregory Crewdson for their pioneering constructed realities and embrace of the cinematic narrative. I depart from them as I employ models that are not professional in any way, but are those I know who are comfortable with me. That is the case with the ceramic artist Dave Hill whose clay-stained hand was the genesis for the photograph titled HAND (Fig. 1.9). The photo of his hand caressing clay shows a hand, hyper-real and coming out of a vague cosmos of ambiguously metaphysical clouds. The image is haunting as it expresses death and creation in the same breath. It speaks a surrealist language of dreams. Though the photograph was taken in his Clemson studio, by manipulating the emulsion on the plate during its development a new image was created that clearly does not exist in life, but exclusively in art. The destruction of the emulsion and the loss of most of the information in the original scene are used to create a new reality.

There are many instances of physical destruction of an image in order to create a new image like HAND. Most influential for me is the Surrealist photographer Raoul Ubac who used caustic chemicals and flames to scar his negatives and to distort his images to bring forth his artistic vision in his “Group” series of images from 1939.

The practice of destruction is evident in the photograph *HOUSE* (Fig 1.5) that shows an image of wounded house, darkly perfect as the world fractures the frame. The image exists as the idyllic dream of home that a woman stares at through the fractured remnants of the boards that gave birth to the house. The arm above the face could be a seer revealing or tearing away a scene to reveal to the woman what the future holds, or it could be the arm of a woman whose reflection is seen as the face in a mirror. The surface of the photograph is torn apart and held together by the body of the house. The fracturing into abstraction comes from the actual destruction of the negative on the plate. During the process of drying the emulsion it literally exploded off the glass. I was able to scan it before it completely disappeared. The image pays homage to the painting "Empire of Light" by Belgian surrealist Rene Magritte, which presents a darkened night scene of houses with a cloudy blue daylight sky above them. The photograph, as did Magritte's painting, addresses the illusion of domestic bliss vs. the reality of that dream coming true. In the image there is no denying the reality and beauty of home, nor of the unavoidable darkness. The New Orleans photographer Clarence John Laughlin once wrote in a letter to the Surrealist photographer Man Ray that "I quite agree with you that the photographer who produces a photograph which is merely technically good, owes more to the discoveries of the lab technicians than to himself. However, the imagination transcends all technical perfection, and sometimes even converts a technical disadvantage to a further advantage."

What makes Laughlin's work significant to my own practice was not the technical process he used to photograph, but what his photographs communicated when completed. Laughlin inspired me in his use of symbolism in the selection of objects and people to be photographed. He made an overt attempt to communicate the subconscious and to form a narrative in his images. His use of a highly structured scene confined to a strict set of photographic rules was the inspiration for my first project of constructed realities entitled BOUNDARIES. The pristine prints from that series were a starting point, but I was seeking a raw poetry in my work inspired by the ecstatic poetry of Rumi and the primitive power of the folk art I have in my collection. The face jug by Lanier Meaders, the self-portrait by Mose Tolliver and the guardian spirit angel by Purvis Young that are part of my collection have a raw uneducated energy to them. The fact that I purchased each piece from in person from the artists adds to their myth. With this thesis work I abandon my academic pursuit of art and embrace the outsider folk power of an artist who makes work because something deep inside of them compels them to create. A local uneducated folk artist I discovered many years ago in Greenville, South Carolina, summed it up for me when he talked of making the wood and metal airplanes that filled his yard. "I sees it in my head and I has to make it," he said.

When I escaped the skilled coldness of my pristine earlier 4x5 images, I left behind the overly forced narrative that I brought to that series and embraced a more symbolic emotional state of visual communication. By simplifying my selection of subject I pared down the scenes of my photographs in a practice of photographic Ikebana.

Each item in the image is carefully chosen as in the photograph THIRST (Fig 1.11). A grotesque head jug resting in a bowl of water on a field of concrete is a portrait representing the quest for spiritual and intellectual knowledge. The historical precedents for the portrayal of the decapitated head in art go from antiquity when primitive headhunters displayed their trophies, to portrayals of the head of Saint John the Baptist presented face up in a bowl to the king who ordered his death. Oscar Rejlander photographed his version of John the Baptist's head in a bowl in 1858 and the contemporary artist Joel Peter Witkin photographed the head of a human corpse in the late 20<sup>th</sup>. Century. The head in my photograph speaks to the confusion of aging and the inevitable substitution of strength of intellect for physical strength as we grow older. The bowl of water symbolizes that thirst for knowledge and the positioning of the face portrays a man who is not drowning, but finds it difficult to drink. Like many of the objects I have photographed for my thesis the symbolism of the head exists along with the personal subjective reality of the object. In this case the jug was acquired from the world famous folk artist Lanier Meaders who received the National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Long after he stopped making the jugs, I found it buried behind his kiln during a visit with him and he let me have it. The jug is a real connection to my past, to my passion for primitive American folk life and for art.

My still lifes, like the portraits of people, are of things that have symbolic or sentimental meaning to me. They are meant to function as symbols of introspection and characters in a descriptive narrative. The photographer Frederick Sommer often

photographed objects he had collected in and around the places he lived. He put in words much of the feeling I have about my work: “My things are not pure: they are a seething wealth of imperfection. Anything that’s alive comes about because of lot of things go into it. “ The photograph STILL LIFE (Fig. 1.12) is representative of that attitude. It portrays an alligator head and a wet pear, resting on an aluminum chair in a rain shower. The reptile is portrayed as luxuriously as the fruit. The visual quality of the pear’s strong metallic sheen in contrast to the reality of its soft skin is met with the more expected strength of the alligators’ armored leather skin. The animal and the fruit pay homage to the 16th. Century trompe l’oeil paintings of Jacopo de’Barbari who’s “Still Life with Partridge with Iron Gloves, 1505” contrasts the soft features of a dead game bird with the hardness of the medieval iron armor gloves. On the surface of the canvas they morph into one another, equally strong visually in opposition to the subjects reality. The work also pays homage to Frederick Sommer’s photograph of a butchered chicken head eating it’s own eye. The image is filled with humor for some and disgust for others. It takes the grotesque and tries to make it beautiful. The background of the aluminum chair made by the Goodform Company around 1960 places the period of the image clearly in the 20<sup>th</sup>. Century. The dissolving of the metal in the photograph places the subject into the realm of dreams and Dali styled surrealism.

STILL LIFE in someway bears resemblance to the tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup>. Century still life of flowers and other natural objects which often focused on ultra sharp detail and served as a scientific document of natural specimens. Photographic scholar Timm Starl



wrote that botanists were among the first to use photography for classification and publication of plants. The cold beauty of the finely rendered image of a flower typified by Franz de Paula Antoine's "The Rose of Jericho" 1860, is a fine example of this kind of photographic observation. This kind of seeing directly relates to the clear modernist rendering of Edward Weston's incredibly detailed photos of a cactus or a pepper. Yet the photograph DEEP BLUE FLOWER (Fig. 1.13) of a blue Morning Glory blossom, is taken in opposite reaction to the scientific expectation of descriptive form, color and values as the viewer conceives of nature. The black and white of the antique collodion process image renders the deep blue flower as white, confusing the viewer by removing the indicators of color and light value. Even the viewer familiar with prints made from traditional black and white film would be mystified that the dark blue flower does not read as deep dark monochrome against lighter leaves. The image is a poem on the transitory nature of the Morning Glory, which blossoms in the morning and fades away during the day. The photo is a metaphor for fleeting physical beauty and the expectations of beauty as we age. The disruption of the cracked and flawed surface of the photograph is in lockstep with the inevitable decay of the flower, yet the essential and sexual beauty of the flower remains whole behind the wrinkled, decaying surface of the image.

The artist, who observes the surface of decay, must eventually address its consequence. The wages of life are death. Outside of memory the photograph is in a way our only real weapon against the finality of death. An image can easily outlive a person and serve as a conduit to the dead. One of the most popular genres of

photography in the Daguerreotype era was the post mortem photograph. The subjects were actual corpses of dead people posed as if they were alive. Because of the expense and the need for a professional photographer to get an image in the early history of photography, the post mortem photos were often the only photos taken of a family member. In a less literal approach to death, photographers like William Mumler were part of a fad called spirit photography in the 1860s which used double exposure and unusual lighting to suggest that the spirits or ghosts of the dead were visiting the living in the photographs. Mumler's most famous photo was taken in 1869 of Mary Todd Lincoln with the "ghost" of her late husband, President Lincoln, placing his hands on her shoulders from behind. In my thesis I acknowledge the presence of death in the photograph PALE HORSE (Fig. 1.14). I chose to address the fear of death with an image of a child's toy by reducing the spirited folk art horse by the artist Keith Spencer into a symbol of darkness and fear through lighting and pushing the film to extremes of exposure and development. This mediation on a child's stick horse speaks to the dark in the most innocent of objects and the fear of childhood's end. It speaks to the fears of the parent facing the dangers of life. The mane of the beast grows like hair from a corpse grown long after death. The book of Revelations in the Christian Bible refers to the horse as a symbol of death. "I looked and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hell was following close behind him."

## CHAPTER THREE

### CONCLUSION

The photographs in my thesis are an attempt to give visual voice to a meditation on age and transition. The work is grounded in intense observation of the life around me that honors my photojournalistic heritage by focusing on real subjects while attempting to go beyond subject into meaning. In order to succeed in my artistic practice I have pushed to escape the boundaries of my subject's reality using antique processes in a contemporary artistic practice so they function in the realm of the expressionistic and psychological, separated from their literal forms. The fractures and self-destruction of the plates are a metaphor for the imperfection and the fractures of life. I seek to show the raw beneath the facade in celebration of the ravaged beauty of life.



Fig. 1.1 ADORATION



Fig. 1.2 RESCUE



Fig. 1.3 BARRIER



Fig. 1.4 SISTERS



Fig. 1.5 ICHTHUS



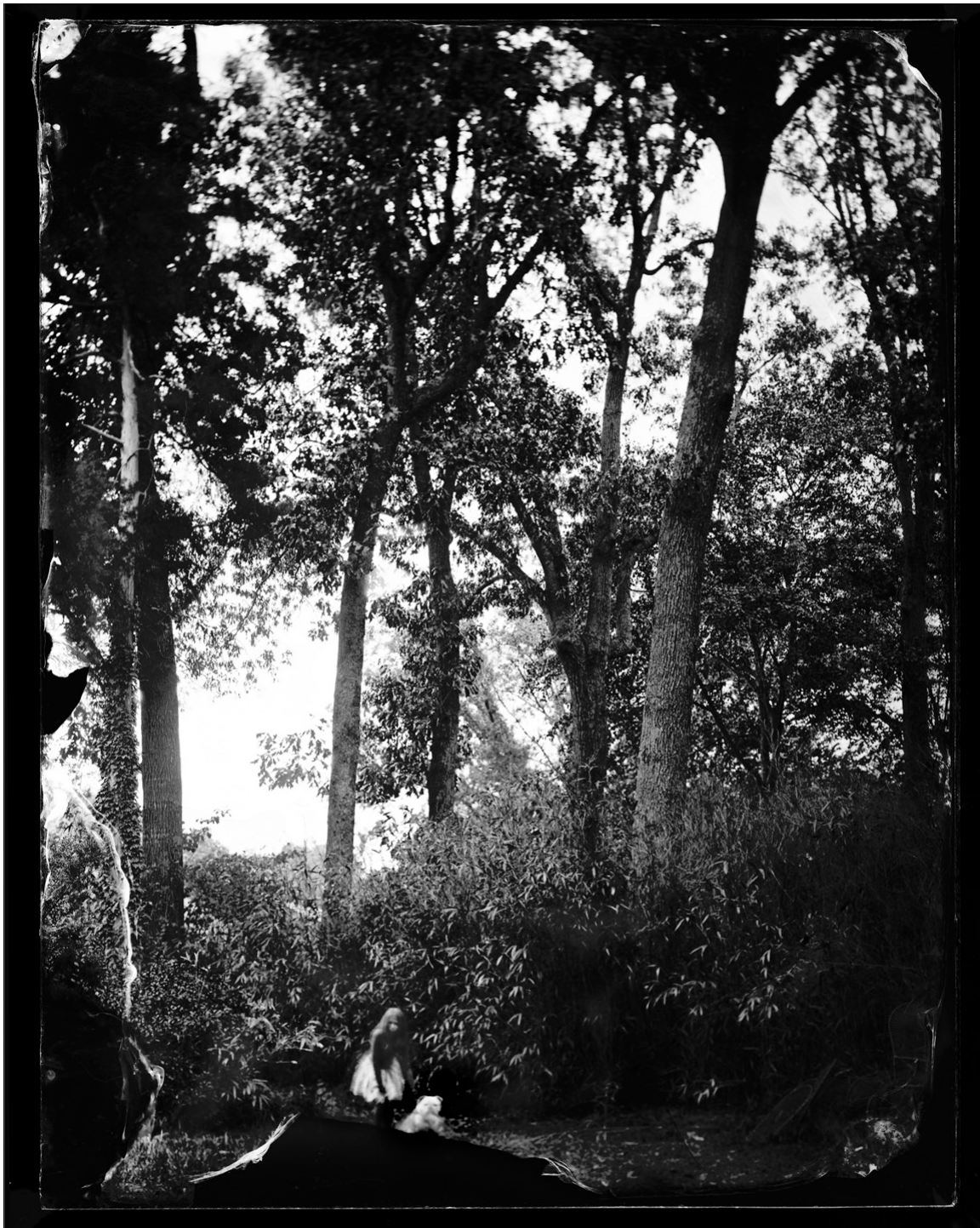


Fig. 1.6 GHOST DOG



Fig. 1.7 BEAST



Fig. 1.8 SEARCH



Fig. 1.9 HAND



Fig. 1.10 HOUSE

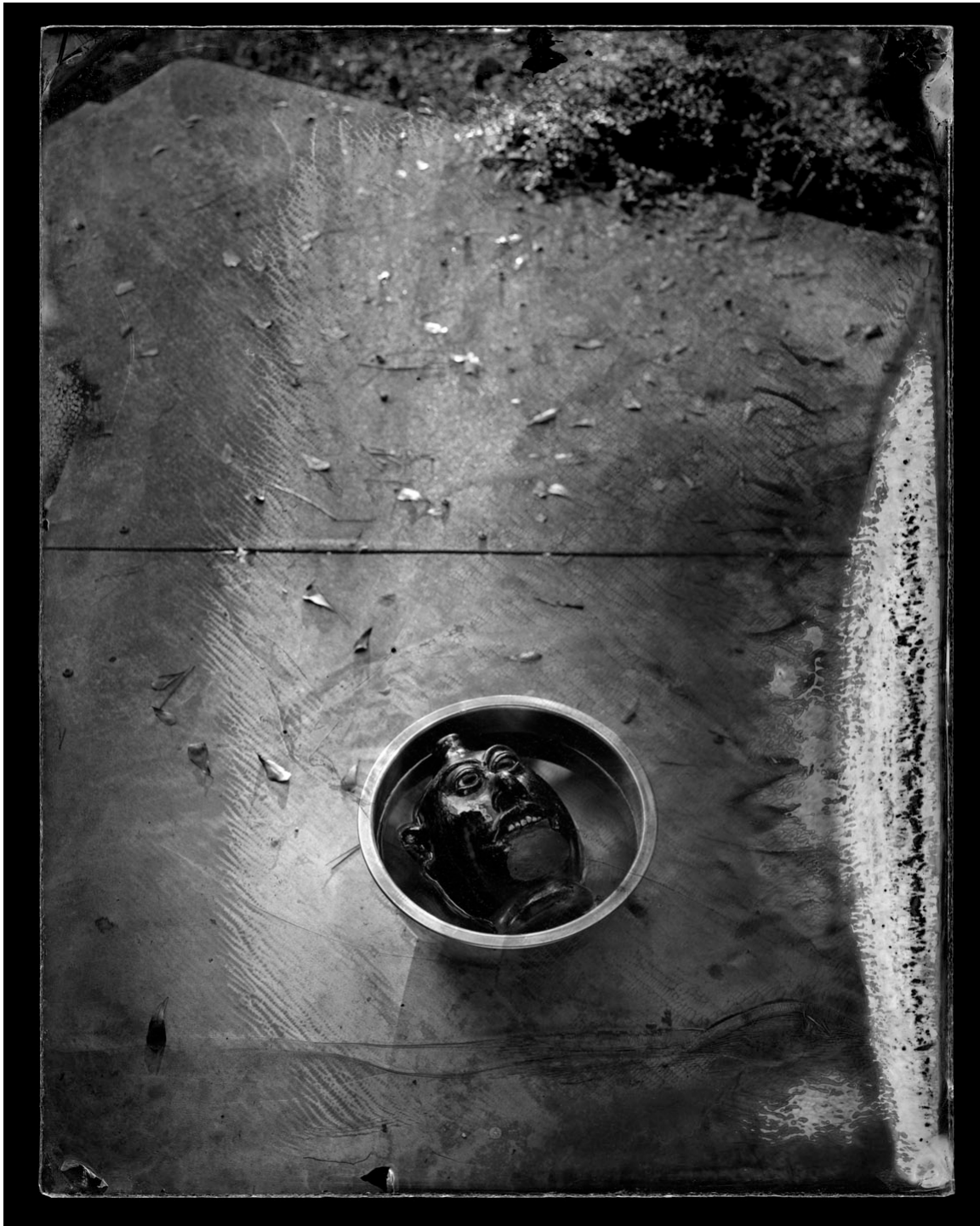


Fig 1.11 THIRST





Fig. 1.12 STILL LIFE



Fig. 1.13 DEEP BLUE FLOWER





Fig. 1.14 PALE HORSE

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